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ABSTRACT

Complying with the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) has presented special problems for small, rural, and isolated schools. This document presents results of surveys and interviews of county and district superintendents, principals, teachers, trustees, and curriculum directors of small, rural, and isolated schools in Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Oregon, and Washington. The surveys were intended to examine some of the creative solutions to fulfilling NCLB requirements and some of the impediments. What emerges from the research is a picture of small and rural schools struggling with a lack of resources but determined to meet the needs of students as well as all the requirements of NCLB. The report looks first at the key challenges these school face, such as declining enrollments and geographical isolation. It next discusses impediments and innovations, focusing on adequate yearly progress, quality teacher recruitment and training, and higher qualifications and appropriate roles of paraprofessionals. It concludes with other issues and opportunities specific to small, rural, and isolated schools. (WFA)

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June 2003

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TOPICAL SUMMARY JUNE 2003

NORTHWEST REGIONAL EDUCATIONAL LABORATORY
Office of Planning and Service Coordination

Challenges and Opportunities of NCLB for Small, Rural, and Isolated Schools

Sometimes, opportunity comes cloaked in disguise. That could very well be the case for small, rural, and isolated schools that are grappling with the provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001. Despite calls for waivers and real concerns about the costs and logistics of the law, school administrators and teachers are attempting to rise to the challenge.

The Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) set out to highlight some of the creative solutions around the region to fulfilling NCLB requirements, and to document some of the impediments.

Surveys and interviews were conducted by investigators from the Montana Small Schools Alliance; Washington Rural Education Center; Intermountain Center for Education Effectiveness at Idaho State University; Oregon Small Schools Association; and Alaska Staff Development Network.

What emerges from their research is a picture of small and rural schools struggling with a lack of resources but determined to muster the frontier spirit and pioneering ways so characteristic of their unique communities.

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Leaving No Child Behind

President George W. Bush's education reform plan, which he described as "the cornerstone of my administration," contains the most sweeping changes to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) since it was enacted in 1965. According to U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige, "This historic reform gives states and school districts unprecedented flexibility in how they spend their education dollars, in return for setting standards for student achievement and holding students and educators accountable for results." Paige asserts that NCLB provides more parental options so children can get the best possible education and invests in effective teaching practices with proven track records.

The Act includes a Rural Education Initiative that provides additional formula funds and flexibility in the use of certain federal funds to small, rural districts. Both the American Association of School Administrators and the National Association of State Boards of Education recognize the Rural Education Achievement Program (REAP) as a "significant development" for rural districts. In a recent publication—*No Child Left Behind: A Guide for Small and Rural Districts*—the two groups acknowledged, "For the first time, there is a direct federal funding stream for rural districts to help them operate within the unique situations in which they exist. Ideally, this section will provide the necessary funds for rural districts to overcome the obstacles they face in implementing NCLB, such as geographic isolation."

To be eligible for the rural funds, a district must have an average daily attendance of fewer than 600 students or be located in counties with fewer than 10 persons per square mile. In addition, the districts must serve only schools located in an area defined by the U.S. Department of Education as being rural or "rural near an urban area" (or an area that the local education agency can demonstrate is defined as rural by a state government agency).

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Key Challenges

For all schools—big and small, urban and rural—No Child Left Behind requires annual reading and math tests for grades three through eight, beginning in 2005. Among other things, it calls for highly qualified teachers in every classroom. Administrators must produce yearly "report cards" that provide comparative information on the quality of schools. Schools that fail to improve must offer students supplemental tutoring and the chance to transfer to a higher-achieving school.

The stakes are high: After six years, struggling schools can be shut down and reconstituted with new staffs. Schools that fail to comply with NCLB risk losing their federal funding.

Such requirements have provoked action on a number of fronts. Montana's governor, Judy Martz, has asked the federal government to change parts of the law, saying it's "pretty impossible" for her state to meet those requirements. "I do support the President in this agenda. It's something that's been badly needed," Martz told *Education Week*. "But, having said that, there are some things as we walk through it that, not only for rural Montana but the rural parts of our nation, have to be addressed."

Like Montana, the Alaska state board of education asked the U.S. Department of Education for some flexibility. Washington state lawmakers passed a resolution urging Congress and the president to fully fund federal mandates, including NCLB. And, the National Rural Education Association approved a legislative platform that "supports the suspension of the enforcement of this act if there are not necessary modifications and funding" to help rural districts comply with the law.

The outcry has prompted Secretary Paige to form a high-level task force, addressing what he called the "unique challenges" of rural America. In May 2003, Paige saw some of those challenges firsthand with a visit to Alaska, a state that has 506 schools spread across an area that's more than twice as big as Texas. After two days of traveling to remote schools—including one where the principal lives in a school closet because of the housing shortage—Paige admitted, "When you said 'rural' to me several days ago, it meant one thing. When you say it to me now, it means a different thing."

So, what difficulties does NCLB present for small, rural, and isolated schools in the Northwest? Not surprisingly, NWREL found many of the same concerns cropped up across the board, from the Alaskan bush to farm towns in Oregon and Idaho, Washington fishing villages, and the wide open spaces of Montana.

Survey respondents in all five states—ranging from county and district superintendents to principals, teachers, trustees, and curriculum directors—ranked adequate yearly progress as their chief stumbling block. The second biggest concern was quality teacher recruitment and training. Educational requirements for paraprofessional staff came third.

The reasons why these provisions of the law present monumental challenges speak to the nature of rural, small, and isolated schools:

- In schools with small populations, the impact of one or two outlying assessment scores can be "deceptive and debilitating."
- At a time when all schools are financially squeezed, funding new initiatives is of great concern, especially in communities with a shrinking revenue base. Limited budgets also hamper the districts' ability to attract and keep highly qualified staff.
- Declining enrollment, faced by many rural districts, affects all facets of NCLB.
- Geographic isolation is detrimental in hiring personnel and providing continuing education programs, as well as addressing school choice.

In addition to those issues, respondents complained that much of NCLB is "undefined or vague in definition."

The stakes are high: After six years, struggling schools can be shut down and reconstituted with new staffs. Schools that fail to comply with NCLB risk losing their federal funding.

Impediments and Innovations

Adequate Yearly Progress

NCLB tightens provisions concerning adequate yearly progress (AYP) by requiring states to specify annual measurable objectives. These will be used to ensure that all students—disaggregated by poverty, race and ethnicity, disability, and limited English competency—are proficient in math and reading within 12 years.

For small and rural schools, their very size and correspondingly small statistical samples are a major roadblock to meeting the requirement. As the Montana study points out, "Scores can fluctuate considerably based on even one child who is special needs, or gifted, or an English language learner, or who moves in or out of their district. (Districts) do not believe that they can consistently move all their children to reach their goals on a yearly point-by-point scale, no matter what resources they commit."

An Alaskan educator notes, "If a particular group happens to have a high percentage of students who experience difficulties, or even have had a rough night before a test, it can put the whole school in the position of failing to make adequate yearly progress." The survey respondent goes on to give a unique example of how results can be skewed by events over which the district has no control: "This year the Iditarod sled dog race was rerouted due to an unusually warm winter. This is the first time ever that the Iditarod has come through Tanana, and it is super exciting to the community. The three most exciting days will be during the assessments. Students will be up late, won't want to be in school at all, and will be unable to concentrate. Good scores under these circumstances would be a miracle…and whether we'll do any better next year will probably depend on next year's weather."

Student mobility also plays a big role. "What do we do for students who are here for the testing but not for the learning?" asked one Idaho educator. Another respondent points out "each year half our students are new to the district."

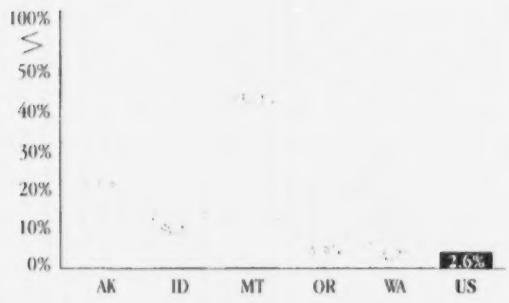
Cultural differences have an impact as well: one district reports that

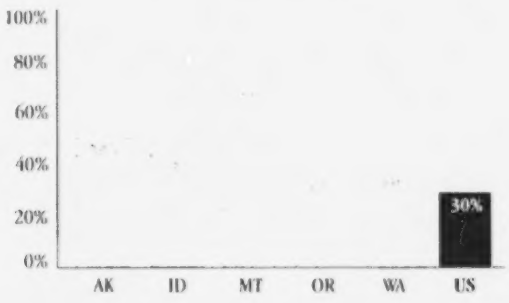
Students in Small, Rural Districts

Alaska:	17,981 out of 133,356 total	
Idaho:	20,236	245,117
Montana:	44,949	154,875
Oregon:	19,377	546,850
Washington:	31,986	1,004,843
United States:	**1,262,428**	**47,850,877**

Districts That Are Small, Rural

Alaska:	29 out of 55 total	
Idaho:	51	114
Montana:	345	449
Oregon:	76	203
Washington:	114	296
United States:	**4,641**	**15,563**





NCLB defines "small, rural districts" as those having fewer than 600 students in average daily attendance or located in counties with fewer than 10 persons per square mile. Also, the districts must serve only schools located in an area defined by the U.S. Department of Education as being rural or rural near an urban area (or in an area defined as rural by a state government agency; the above charts do not include districts that may meet the state definition exception).

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migrant families often take two or three months to visit family members elsewhere and students are not in school during these extended visits. Attempts to suggest that they attend classes are perceived as "anti-family."

Small enrollments work against schools in qualifying for grants or supplemental funds to help improve progress. One district explains, "We have 54 percent minority students and have been designated as a failing school. But our numbers are too small, according to the state formula, to qualify for funds."

Given all these issues, districts can still point with pride to creative attempts to overcome the impediment of adequate yearly progress. Here are some of the strategies investigators uncovered:

ONE PROBLEM: For small and rural schools, their very size and correspondingly small statistical samples are a major roadblock.... "Scores can fluctuate considerably based on even one child who is special needs, or gifted, or an English language learner, or who moves in or out of their district."

Strategies

- "Student attendance was improved using three ideas. The policy on achievement was changed; the policy change was publicized and discussed in the community; and students with continued patterns of extremely poor attendance, exceeding the new limits, were dropped from the school. As a result, student attendance is up dramatically for the 2002–2003 school year." *Plummer/ Worley School District (Idaho)*
- "Two small schools collectively wrote a grant for remedial funding, as neither of the schools qualified individually." *Clark County and West Jefferson School Districts (Idaho)*
- "We are changing our education system to a quality schools model, with more individual instruction that is often performance based. This comprehensive school reform has raised the level of concern of all stakeholders and will improve the already successful educational opportunities in our district. Where our assessments indicate high rates of success, we have raised our expectations to an even higher level." *Valdez City Schools (Alaska)*
- "We have received a CSR grant and REA grants for our district which allow us to implement training to improve teaching strategies in reading and oral language development. We are in the process of participating in a school reform project called High Performing Learning Communities to enable us to identify areas of need and develop strategic plans of improvement for each of schools to meet those needs." *Southwest Region School District (Alaska)*
- "Curriculum, assessment, and professional development are being done through a consortium of 31 small school districts consisting of one-teacher rural schools through Class B (larger rural) districts. The sharing of problems and ideas with such a diverse group has shown some great results." *South Central Montana*
- "I have started my class on graphs that show their progress each quarter, so they can visually see their growth or loss in each subject area." *Pioneer School (Montana)*
- "Many districts like Santiam Canyon have shifted all their Title IA funds to their K–4 elementary. Their plan is to provide the best foundation in reading and math." *Oregon*
- "The Oregon Department of Education continues to work with small districts to find a useful measure of progress. Suggestions have been made to change the process for disaggregating, if there are less than 350 students in a school (or whatever number seems appropriate). Local districts are using MAP data

(Prospect) or Oregon Plus (Amity) to demonstrate growth by students." *Oregon*

• "Our staff meets in horizontal and vertical teams to discuss alignment of curriculum. These meetings have really helped to eliminate gaps in learning. In addition, we've used the power of technology to integrate literacy. In pilot partnerships with University of Washington we have added programs, called 'college in the high school' and 'digital learning commons' that allow our students to take classes previously not available from on-site instructors." *Washington*

• "Our district shows strong gains in reading due to excellent classroom instruction coupled with Phonguage, a remedial program." *Washington*

• "We have made it a focus to keep class sizes low and get all kids reading at grade level by the end of third grade. Bringing focused staff development and sustaining the collaboration of teachers and paraeducators have helped bridge the gap." *Ephrata School District (Washington)*

Together with remedial steps, the director of the Oregon Small Schools Association stresses the importance of "a continuous and effective public relations campaign" to galvanize school support. He suggests communicating with parents and other community patrons on a regular basis through tools like a monthly district newsletter and individual building updates. Parent conferences, grandparents' day, senior citizens' luncheons, and back-to-school week activities are all ways to engage the community. Oregon's Amity School District even provides free passes to all the retired residents of the community, encouraging them to attend school plays, athletic events, and other student activities.

Two Idaho superintendents (Sugar-Salem and West Jefferson) recommend contracting with a local university to develop a student achievement data base. Specifically, the district and university collaborate on developing a data map with the university assisting the district in recording all data. The university then provides statistical analysis, as well as training for the software package used to store data, and presents the data for publicity purposes.

The American Association of School Administrators (AASA) and National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE) suggest rural districts work closely with their state education agencies to ensure proper AYP alternatives are developed for districts with small student populations. They also advise districts to create data systems accessible to all teachers and principals to allow them to deal with the growing influx of student data, including assessment scores. "These numbers are going to be increasingly important in the coming years and it is important to have something in place to help you and your staffs interpret the results and translate them into changes in instructional practice," according to the AASA and NASBE's *No Child Left Behind: A Guide for Small and Rural Districts*. The guide is available online at www.aasa.org/government_relations/rural/NCLB_and_rural_schools.PDF.

Finally, one Oregon superintendent notes that "schools (need) to be much more strategic about how they improve their test scores. Exactly what kids need to improve? Where can we precisely expend our energy to meet the target for next year? If we succeed, how do we sustain it for the next year? If we

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fail, where else can we target for the best results?"

Quality Teacher Recruitment and Training

Under NCLB, Title I schools must provide instruction by highly qualified staff. States must develop plans with measurable annual objectives ensuring that all teachers of core academic subjects are highly qualified. This means that they have state certification, hold a bachelor's degree, and have demonstrated subject area competency. All new hires in Title I programs after the start of the 2002–2003 school year must meet these requirements, while existing teachers have until the end of the 2005–2006 school year to do so.

Saying "one size does not fit all," an administrator in Alaska wonders how a school with just three teachers in K–12 can meet the requirements. "What works in Detroit and Dallas does not necessarily work in Haines or bush Alaska," he says.

In our northernmost state, 100 schools employ three or fewer teachers; 36 employ just one teacher. NWREL's Alaskan investigator concludes it is "impossible" to hire one specialized teacher for each content area at the middle and high school levels and "difficult" to expect current staff or new hires to have multiple highly qualified content areas. Exacerbating the situation is the problem of high turnover in remote villages: many schools are already faced with meeting the regulations with new hires.

While Alaska's case may be extreme, it hardly stands alone. Almost all rural, small, or isolated schools report difficulty in hiring and retaining teachers because of low salary scales, little or no employment opportunities for a spouse, and lack of inservice programs. Also, declining enrollments may cause districts to cut secondary courses that are prized by the "difficult-to-find" teacher, prompting him or her to leave.

One Idaho administrator laments, "The (income) level of the community is extremely low. Would that fact attract a teacher?" A Washington respondent paints an even bleaker picture. "There is essentially no reason to move to either of the two small communities I live in," he says. "There is no industry here. The railroads left, the number of farmers is dwindling, and the government is paying farmers to idle their ground. The school is the only remaining remnant of a time gone by."

Montana reports that the state's low teaching salaries and few benefits are driving away newly minted teachers en masse. Seventy-five percent of new graduates from the teacher preparation program at the University of Montana-Western are now going out-of-state for their first teaching positions. "Western's traditional role has been to prepare educators for the small, rural schools of the state," according to NWREL's Montana investigator. "There is great concern about replacing and keeping the qualified teachers the schools now have."

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In Oregon, educators express concern that small districts with middle school models will resort to K–8 educational systems due to the requirement that teachers must teach in their fields. "This will disenfranchise many competent and successful 'old timers' and label them as less qualified teachers," the Oregon study concludes.

Some small, remote, and rural Oregon districts are trying to address the impediment of quality teacher recruitment and training by providing signing bonuses or incentives to entice the highly qualified and properly licensed teacher. Some are providing housing, paying moving expenses, or placing newly hired candidates higher on the salary schedule—a fact that could create

collective bargaining issues with existing staff members.

Other strategies gleaned from around the region include:

Strategies

• "Several of our schools have done internal training on early release days. Many hold school four days a week: this provides more uninterrupted class time with field trips and athletic events typically held on Fridays and Saturdays. Some Fridays are then reserved for professional development activities." *Perrydale, Prospect, and various Eastern Oregon schools*

• "North Central Educational Service District (ESD)is working in consortia with six rural, remote districts within the ESD region to provide training. Pooling resources and being able to leverage individual expertise in subject areas meets their needs." *Oregon*

• "All our teachers teach multiage/grades/subjects. We are hoping to offer 'crash seminars' to prepare staff for taking tests versus coursework needed to become highly qualified. In addition, we will probably assist with test fees." *Southeast Island Schools (Alaska)*

• "We are hiring only highly qualified teachers to work through our Online School House program, and they can reside anywhere in the U.S. These teachers will become the teacher of record for students in our regular school if we do not have or cannot find an in-house teacher who meets the highly qualified definition. These students will be supervised by a certified teacher who may not be highly qualified in that subject but has a strong background so he/she can provide tutoring and direct instruction to students having trouble." *Craig City Schools (Alaska)*

• "We use retirees to fill part-time teaching positions." *Midvale School District (Idaho)*

• "We provide funding for teachers to obtain a master's degree. This helps our retention rate: 100 percent of the teachers who have used this program still teach in our school district." *Aberdeen School District (Idaho)*

• "(We're looking at) the possibility of three small schools, located within 25 miles of each other, sharing a teacher. This allows them to cover the 'extra sections' each district has with creative staffing and scheduling." *Richfield School District (Idaho)*

• "Seniors in our high school who express a desire to be a teacher are educated in the requirements of NCLB and supported in searching out programs that provide certification in more than one high-demand subject area." *Rockland School District (Idaho)*

• "One way our district is addressing the need is to look at job sharing positions. We have two qualified young teachers with small children who couldn't be in a full-time position, but they can each be half-time." *South Central Montana*

• "We're using some of our REAP (Rural Education Achievement Program) funds to give a teacher bonus." *Edgar Elementary (Montana)*

The AASA and NASBE acknowledge that having every teacher "highly qualified" by the 2005–2006 school year can be "one of the most problematic requirements for rural districts to reach." The two groups recommend small districts come up with creative incentives in order to attract qualified candidates. One idea: provide reduced cost housing to compete with the higher salaries offered by larger rural and suburban districts.

Creativity is also needed to retain staff. "Perhaps developing a collaborative agreement with a nearby community college or university to encourage the teachers to take the courses required to meet the new requirements would help this situation," the organizations suggest.

One Solution: "We are hoping to offer 'crash seminars' to prepare staff for taking tests versus coursework needed to become highly qualified. In addition, we will probably assist with test fees."

Higher Qualifications and Appropriate Roles for Paraprofessionals

NCLB specifies that paraprofessionals may not provide instructional support services except under the direct supervision of a teacher. In addition, paraprofessionals in Title I programs must have at least two years of post-secondary education or a high school diploma plus proof of the necessary skills through a formal state or local academic assessment. The requirements apply to all new hires in the Title I program after January 8, 2002; existing paraprofessionals have four years from that date to comply with the rules. The requirements do not apply, however, to paraprofessionals used for translation or parental involvement, though these staff members still must have a high school diploma.

Small, rural, and remote schools face the same roadblocks recruiting highly qualified paraeducators as they do with teachers. Limited hiring pools and low wages (often minimum wage) create considerable barriers. Despite technology, the delivery of college coursework to rural or isolated districts can be difficult or impractical.

Beyond logistical issues, there are cultural issues at play. For example, many paraeducators in Alaska serve as cultural and native language resources at schools where teachers—recruited from outside the state—don't have the background to provide these services. Paraeducator jobs at the school may also be one of the few employment opportunities in a remote village. "There will be much frustration, both culturally and economically, at the loss of these jobs within these small communities," said the Alaska study.

An administrator in Bering Strait, Alaska, points out, "Many of our current paraprofessionals will have difficulty meeting their requirements for a variety of reasons, (including) the cost of classes. Most of them are primary wage earners in their families and most participate in subsistence activities on weekends and during the summer."

Another Alaskan district, as well as one in Oregon, report some of their paraprofessionals have already responded to the new requirements with plans to retire early.

The loss of these staff members will be felt acutely. "Most of the human connections that exist in small schools are with long-time employees who are very familiar with family issues, siblings, and individual needs," says the Oregon study. "Those relationships and institutional memory cannot be replaced, and will suffer, when those positions must be eliminated or replaced by more qualified people who lack the personal relations and community support."

Administrators around the region also worry about the future economic ramifications of this NCLB provision. One Washington educator predicts that "pay will eventually become an issue for the paras and their union. Simply put, the budgets will not stretch much further." That concern is echoed in Idaho, where districts wonder how they'll pay wages that are commensurate with paraprofessionals' newly acquired education and skills.

In searching for solutions, many small and rural districts are looking to Educational Service Districts for leadership and assistance. Oregon's Amity School District has already sent six individuals through an assessment process developed by Willamette ESD. In Washington, at least one local ESD is in the process of developing a pro-

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gram that will address future educational options as well as remedial help for paraprofessionals looking to "pass the test." A number of other strategies are as follows:

Strategies

• "We are working with the University of Alaska Southeast-Ketchikan to meet face-to-face with paraprofessionals. They will assist staff in completing placement assessments, financial aid and scholarship applications, and in program planning to develop a course of study. Each paraprofessional can apply for up to $600 per year for tuition reimbursement…and we offer a few college credit courses on-site at no cost." *Southeast Island Schools (Alaska)*

• "We are reducing our paraprofessional staff numbers in order to hire teachers. We are supporting those staff who are engaged in trying to meet the standards." *Gateway School District (Alaska)*

• "The local community college offers training for paraprofessionals. Students will work toward a teaching certificate." *Eastern Montana*

• "Paraprofessional dollars can be expanded by combining positions, making a six-hour day into an eight-hour day, and including work on a variety of tasks. This reduces the expensive fringe benefit costs." *Highland School District (Idaho)*

• "District-established scholarships help aides take online courses from colleges offering such programs." *Horseshoe Bend School District (Idaho)*

• "Santiam Canyon School District has developed a district test that all their paraprofessionals must take. In addition, they require paraprofessionals to complete 10 hours of training that relate to their specific job, district goals, or individual school improvement plan." *Oregon*

• "Title I funds are being used to provide learning opportunities and college coursework for paraprofessionals." *Prospect School District (Oregon)*

• "Our communities offer few jobs for spouses. Oftentimes there is a wife who wants to work, especially as a part-time educational assistant. This office hired three licensed educators (one holding an M.A.), wanting part-time work. This is one area that is a strength for small, rural communities." *Lake Education Service District (Oregon)*

The AASA and NASBE point out that the best option for rural districts is to work with their state departments of education on determining the formalized assessment that will be used for their state. Together with a portfolio assessment for current paraprofessionals, "(this) may offer the least costly and most feasible option to comply with these provisions."

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Other Issues and Opportunities

The NCLB Act, weighing in at more than a thousand pages, contains dozens of provisions: some are not perceived as problematical, while others appear to be of little or no relevance to small, rural, and isolated schools. However, a few requirements—besides the three already detailed in this summary—drew especially strong comments from NWREL's respondents.

Under NCLB, Title I schools and districts that fail to make adequate yearly progress for two consecutive years must be identified as in need of improvement. Students in those schools must be given the option to transfer to another public school that has not been identified for improvement. If a school fails to make adequate yearly progress for a third year, students from low-income families have the option to use Title I funds for supplemental educational services from a public or private sector provider. Such providers, approved by the state, may include faith-based organizations.

Both school choice and supplemental services raise red flags. As the Alaskan study observes, "In a state where districts are the size of states and villages are not accessible by roads, providing choice and supplemental providers proves a challenge." For such districts, the only viable options may be home schools, charter schools, distance learning, vouchers, and public boarding schools.

The most cynical respondents ask if "AYP is really a way to institute vouchers and reduce funding sufficiently to destroy public school systems." The issue of survival—not only for these public schools but also for a way of life—is palpable, as the superintendent of the Tanana City School District in Alaska explains in detail:

> The provisions of NCLB will make it harder for small, remote, rural Alaskan schools to get federal money, and that fact supports the push to create "regional learning centers," a.k.a. boarding schools. History has already shown us that having to send students away to boarding schools disrupts families, tends to produce dysfunctional individuals, and causes the children to grow up without parenting skills for their own children. Enrollment loss to the regional learning centers will further cut funding to local schools, causing more cuts to the quality of schooling. Families who have any resources move to the urban areas to give their children a better education, causing more enrollment drop and further funding declines. Eventually, the local schools close. When that happens, the community dies.

Despite that bleak scenario and other fears about the future, educators throughout the region remain focused on fulfilling their commitment to children. "In spite of all the concerns expressed, Oregon's small, rural, and remote schools will continue to provide outstanding educational opportunities for each of our students," states the Oregon study. The Montana investigator admits, "(Meeting new state and federal requirements) has not been easy for either the Montana Small Schools Alliance or for the schools, but in true Montana spirit they are rising to this often frustrating challenge."

Even Alaska—a state with impediments the size of Denali—manages to sound somewhat optimistic in the end. According to the investigator there, "Alaskan superintendents and other district administrators are working to overcome these impediments through partnerships, a focus on student achievement, and support of teachers and paraeducators. They are identifying and utilizing the resources they do have, including supportive communities and agencies, great staff, good partnerships with local institutions of higher education, high standards, the use of technology and distance education, and the ability to track individual student growth more easily than larger schools."

Perhaps the most telling outlook comes from a rural Washington educator, who issues an invitation:

> Come in and spend a day with us and see all the wonderful things we do for students, not just cognitively but to enhance the whole child. We give them clothes, snacks, safety, treats, love, fun, and model good behavior. We have become surrogate parents in a very dangerous world. We open our doors every Monday. No matter what…we are here for children.

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"SURVEY RESPONDENTS IN ALL FIVE STATES—RANGING FROM COUNTY AND DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENTS TO PRINCIPALS, TEACHERS, TRUSTEES, AND CURRICULUM DIRECTORS—RANKED ADEQUATE YEARLY PROGRESS AS THEIR CHIEF STUMBLING BLOCK. THE SECOND BIGGEST CONCERN WAS QUALITY TEACHER RECRUITMENT AND TRAINING. EDUCATIONAL REQUIREMENTS FOR PARAPROFESSIONAL STAFF CAME THIRD."

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More About the NCLBA Rural Education Achievement Program

Title VI Part B of the No Child Left Behind Act provides additional opportunities for rural schools through both waivers (Alternative Uses of Funds Authority) and grants. On page one the eligibility requirements for the Small, Rural School Grant (SRSG) Program are described and the demographics of these Northwest school districts are depicted in the tables on page three.

A second Rural Education Achievement (REAP) grant program administered through the state education agencies is the Rural and Low-Income School Program. To be eligible, school districts must not qualify for the SRSG program, have a poverty rate of 20% or greater, and a locale code of 6, 7, or 8. For more information about REAP, please visit the U. S. Department of Education website at **www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/reap.html.**

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